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1 Peter 3:13-18

Thirteenth Message

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THE BOMB SQUAD: AFTER THE EXPLOSION

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

Recently I browsed through a diary my wife Emily had prepared for me when we studied in Europe 20 years ago. It read:

Saturday, July 18, 1970—The sun finally came out after a fashion and shone its glory down on us. We headed back across the border into Northern Bavaria from Austria to the town of Oberammergau. The Passion Play was being presented, but we didn't get a chance to see it...

In 1633, the village of Oberammergau was spared from a plague that threatened the area. In deep appreciation to the Lord, the community vowed to reenact the Passion Play every ten years. With a cast of 700 villagers, it takes eight hours to perform this historic drama. In 1970 there were nearly 100 performances with a total audience of 500,000 people, but we were not among them. How disappointed we were that we could not get tickets!

But the apostle Peter tells us that there is a way to share in the "passion play" as participants rather than spectators. Our focus during the past several weeks has been on how a pilgrim behaves in a hostile world, using examples such as a Christian's relationship to government, the workplace or the home, etc.

Peter says that the Christian can exert tremendous influence and win others to Christ through godly conduct and a servant's heart. The text today establishes how we are to behave when matters escalate and lead to persecution for Christ's sake. Using the analogy of the mine-field from last week's study, what are we to do after we take the explosion from the enemy?

A righteous action can often provoke hostile reactions from the unbeliever. To encourage believers who were persecuted for their faith in his day, Peter gives unjust suffering a new orientation. He declares that God is lifting the Christian onto a stage to reenact the drama of the cross before the world. Thus, when we are afflicted, we have a position of privilege, as we assume the role that Jesus took to redeem mankind.

And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. (1 Pet 3:13-18 NASB)

I. A New Orientation (3:13-14a)

A. Righteous Behavior Eliminates Much Suffering (3:13)

Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?

First, Peter gives us a new orientation about suffering for righteousness sake. Righteous behavior eliminates much suffering, says the apostle. He understands that God is behind government, and that he created it to punish evildoers, while giving praise to those who do right (1 Pet 2:13-14). Therefore, people can expect to receive good treatment if they live in harmony with the world and are zealous, ardent lovers of good (1 Pet 3:8-9). Proverbs 16:7 says, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him." Unfortunately, I think much of the suffering Christians experience today could be eliminated if we were righteous. Often we suffer in the workplace not because of our good character, but because we are hard to live with, uncooperative, gruff, arrogant, lazy or unprofessional. Doing what is right eliminates much suffering, says the apostle.

B. Righteous Behavior Imparts New Meaning to Suffering (3:14a)

Even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness [and you probably will!], you are blessed.

When we suffer for the sake of righteousness, rather than for sins committed, our suffering is profitable. On stage, where the spotlight will be cast on us alone, we are blessed with the opportunity to act out the passion of Christ before the world. Verse 13 cites Isaiah 50:9, which speaks of the servant of the Lord who will suffer for the nation Israel: "Behold the LORD helps me, Who is he who condemns me?" The Greek translates it, "Who is there to harm me?" Jesus likewise spoke those words at his trial. As the righteous Son, he knew that if anyone was to harm him, it was not to punish him for his sin. Rather, he was to receive the unjust punishment meant for others in order to redeem the world. His suffering, therefore, was raised to a higher level.

Thus Peter says that we are blessed when we are in a similar position. In 1 Peter 4:14, he expands this idea, saying, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and God rest upon you." This idea of the Spirit resting on someone and being blessed comes from the Old Testament. It is used of special people whom God uses as instruments in a significant moment of history to take the kingdom and multiply it to others. In Numbers 11, for example, Moses faced unjust suffering when the nation murmured against him. God took a portion of his Spirit and put it on 70 elders, who prophesied. Moses was blessed, because his suffering caused the ministry of the Spirit to multiply from one to 70. Likewise, Isaiah 11:2 describes the Messiah upon whom the Spirit of God will rest:

**And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.**

Peter might also be recalling his own experience at Pentecost. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin for healing a lame man, his righteous suffering gave the Spirit opportunity to bring 5000 men to faith (Acts 4:4).

When we suffer for righteousness sake, it is an opportunity for God to use us in a unique way to further his kingdom. Therefore, we must not cower in fear because it is God who has placed us on the stage. It is a privileged position and a blessing indeed!

The kingdom multiplies, I believe, because the depravity of the world's heart is revealed on stage. I think one reason God allows unjust suffering is not to play games with the world, but to demonstrate how sick the human heart is. When a person sins in the face of righteousness, his sin is revealed to him in black and white. Faced with his own inadequacy, he is in a humble position to hear the gospel and turn to the Lord in repentance.

Thus we are to look on suffering with a new orientation. Righteous behavior eliminates much suffering, but if we suffer now it is a high calling. We are God's unique instruments to spread his kingdom. Rather than shrinking back now, Peter would say that we must step onto the stage and witness boldly to the hope that is within us.

II. A Renewed Courage (3:14b-16)

And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; having a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

A. Do Not Fear Those Threatening You (3:14b)

Peter recounts the message of Isaiah 8:11, when the prophet tells the righteous in Israel not to fear the threat of the Assyrian invasion:

**You are not to say, "It is a conspiracy!"
In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy,
And you are not to fear what they [the Assyrians] fear or be in dread of it.
It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy.
And He shall be your fear,
And He shall be your dread.
Then He shall become a sanctuary. (Isa 8:12-14a)**

Isaiah exhorts the righteous not to fear Assyria, but to fear the Lord, because he is using the Assyrian army for his sovereign purposes. If Israel *sanctified* the Lord (set him apart as Lord in their hearts), he would become their refuge in the midst of the Assyrian judgment. Jesus confirmed this when he said, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). Thus we are to fear God, not man.

B. Fear the Lord (3:15a)

Sanctify Christ in your hearts always being ready to give an account, of him who asks, concerning the hope that is in you.

How do we fear the Lord? Peter says that we must take the witness stand and give a testimony. Up to this time the Christian has been silent, letting his righteous acts do the talking and perhaps suffering as a result. But now he is invited to speak. From the Greek word "account" we derive the word "apologetic," to give a defense. This word is used in the context of a court room. When he is invited to speak in court, a person gives a defense. In the Greek culture, every sensible person was expected to be prepared "to give and receive a reason," to discuss

questions of opinion or conduct intelligently and temperately. Thus Peter wants these Christians to eagerly defend their position in Christ and the hope that is in them.

When a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon missionary comes to the door and says, "I don't think Jesus was God," can you tell them why you do believe that he is? When your boss is upset because your priorities clash with your job, can you tell him why you believe what you believe? We must give an account when asked. Jesus said, "Before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. It will lead to an *opportunity for your testimony*" (Luke 21:12-13). Therefore, we must remember that we are not on trial when we are called to defend our position in Christ. The opposition is on trial before God. God is conducting court, giving us an opportunity to talk about the living hope in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps Peter's darkest moment was when he denied Christ to those who charged him with being a follower of Jesus. Three times he was asked by the lowliest members of society, including a slave girl, to proclaim Jesus as his Lord. But Peter refused to speak in his defense, and in fact denied the Lord. At that moment, Jesus looked at him, and Peter wept bitter tears.

I had a similar experience when I worked in construction before Emily and I were married. The construction workers on the job did not hold marriage in high regard. When they heard that I was about to get married, all of them took me aside and strongly exhorted me not to do so. They related disastrous marital experiences, and many of them told me, "If it is sex you want, go look for it on the street." I was too intimidated to speak about the hope that was in me and God's plan for marriage. I determined then that I would be ready to speak for the Lord at the next job I had.

After Emily and I were married, I got a job working as a carpenter's helper. This time I was ready. God allowed me to share Christ with every carpenter on the job. The difference in my life between being a secret Christian on my old job and putting myself on the front line in my new job was like night and day.

Jesus said, "So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves, for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute" (Luke 21:14-15). It might seem curious that on the one hand Peter says to prepare, while Jesus says not to prepare. Peter says we must be *ready* to speak, while Jesus says that we must not take a script with us when we speak. What makes a testimony powerful is that its boldness and passion come from personal experience. Solicitors who confront me with rehearsed speeches that sound like a recording have no impact on me. I know that they are not talking directly to my needs, but are following a generic script. It is the same when religious workers witness like wind-up dolls. Written testimonies that are read may be polished, but they are flat. They do not have the passion that comes from stepping into the presence of the living God to give account in faith. When the Lord supplies the words, the passion will be obvious to those who hear the message.

Jim F. is an excellent example to me of a believer who has trained himself to speak for the Lord. I have asked him to share with us:

Jim: When I was 12-years-old, my parents divorced and our family was split up. I experienced many emotions, including insecurity and fear, and did not have much hope in my life. Looking for anything that would give me stability, I decided to do whatever was necessary to fill the void in my life.

I became a person who compromised to get along. I was the class clown, the joker who would be whatever it took to be accepted and liked. This carried on into my adult life, and I found the effects emotionally devastating. I was searching for identity, who I was and why I was here, and wanted something I did not see much of in the world—integrity. It was one thing I desired, but I did not know how to get it. I finally found the man who owns the market on integrity, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he has filled the void in my life. He has taken me from wandering, and has given me a position and a stage to speak for him. In the work place, I am no longer one of the guys. I am a spokesman for Jesus Christ.

I had many opportunities to express my faith in Jesus Christ at the car dealership where I worked as an auto mechanic for several years. One time I walked into the lunch room and found a picture of Jesus upside down over the microwave. I was infuriated, knowing that someone was trying to provoke me. I knew that I did not have the correct words or attitude at that moment to respond. I could not think properly because of my emotions. So I spent much of the night in prayer, and decided that the proper way to respond was in love. I asked the Lord to show me who the man was so I could explain my position as a Christian, and he gave me that opportunity. Instead of being slandered by an unrighteous response, Jesus Christ was the victor because I could show the power of his love to the man.

Through this newly found integrity in my life I have also come to love an elderly woman named Addie who is 100 years old. Every Saturday for the last four years I have had the privilege to serve her by doing such tasks as trimming her toenails, cutting her hair, grocery shopping, and working in the yard with her. My greatest joy is that we have spent many hours studying the Bible together. This is not something I would have done before I was a believer, and I can only thank the Lord Jesus Christ, who is my Savior. He is the one who has given me integrity.

C. Be Gentle (3:15b)

...with gentleness and reverence.

Peter says that when we speak about the hope we have, we are to be gentle and treat the unbeliever with respect. So often Christians are argumentative when trying to persuade the world. When we become argumentative, we may win the battle, but we will lose the war. If the whole objective is to convert hearts, bathing our speech in gentleness is evidence enough that we have the truth and have nothing to defend. When we speak, we must always show respect and love, giving the person the same grace that Christ extends to us.

The apostle Paul learned this principle through humbling circumstances. As a young Christian in Damascus he was gifted with a great knowledge of the Old Testament and its relationship to the incarnation. From Acts 9:22-25, we see that “Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Messiah.” Paul won the arguments, but he did not win a soul because he was argumentative and arrogant. So the brothers sent him out of town hidden in a basket to break him of his overbearing ways.

Years later, when Paul writes to his young friend Timothy, he says, “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they many come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim 2:24-26). It is love and gentle-

ness that disarms the enemy. So without the spirit of grace, all of our arguments, regardless of merit, will only strengthen the enemy in the person’s life.

D. Be Pure (3:16)

...and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

It is important when we stand in the spotlight of the courtroom that our character matches our testimony. Otherwise, there is no power in what we say. This does not mean we will do everything right as Christians. What it does mean is that we clear up our wrongs and are committed to righteousness so that when we speak there is weight behind the testimony. Unfortunately, immorality among Christian leaders in recent years has reduced their message to insignificance, and has tainted others’ testimony. We must keep a clear conscience so that when we go into battle, our conscience is not an obstacle to our message. It is difficult for me to go into battle against idolatry if I am carrying an idol in my own heart. When we go to battle with a clean heart, however, we can speak with authority, in purity and gentleness. Then our enemies will be put to shame.

Acts 4:7-14 recounts an event from Peter’s own life when the authorities brought him to court after he had healed a lame man. They asked him,

“By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for the benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.”

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had *nothing to say in reply*.

Something similar to this happened to me when I was a sophomore in college. Our college pastor, Dave Roper, used to meet with me once a week to prepare a Bible study I led at the fraternity house. One day as we were working together two Mormon missionaries interrupted us. They had been sent by my uncle, who was also a Mormon, to convert me. I let them in, but did not know how to deal with their beliefs. Dave, however, responded in gentleness, saying, “We appreciate many things that you folks do, your priority on family life and your love for morality. But I have one objection with your religion. When Jesus said, ‘It is finished,’ you say it is not finished.” The men did not know what to say, and it was an education for me on how to disarm the enemy with a gentle spirit.

Just then my roommate, whom I had led to Christ the night before, walked in the door. Dave said, “Brad, tell these men what happened to you last night.” Brad said, “I’d love to! I was in the dregs of sin, getting my self-worth from basketball. Now I have accepted Christ, and I feel cleansed and redeemed to new life. The Spirit resides in me. It is wonderful!” The missionaries had nothing to say in reply. Dave’s response

and Brad's testimony was all done with boldness, gentleness and grace, as they depended on the Spirit for the right words.

In summary, Peter tells us that suffering unjustly puts us on a stage for the world to see. When asked to speak in the courtroom, we must speak in dependence on God, in gentleness and purity. The first step in handling unjust suffering is to renew our perspective that it is the very avenue God uses to spread his kingdom. Therefore the focus should not be on our enemies, but on him as Lord. With courage we can then step forward to speak.

III. A Unique Privilege: Playing the Role of Christ (3:17-18)

For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right, rather than for doing what is wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

A. The Nature of His Suffering (3:18a)

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God.

Here Peter sets out the nature of Jesus' suffering. He was the one just person suffering on behalf of all the unjust so as to bring atonement. In the ancient world, the concept that someone else's suffering would bring cleansing to another was difficult to accept. One philosopher named Plotinus said of Christianity, "For men who have become evil to demand that others should be their saviours by sacrifice of themselves is not lawful even in prayer." Another philosopher admitted, that "my suffering makes me better," but thought it absurd to suppose that the suffering of another could do so.

B. The Value of His Suffering (3:18b)

...having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;

The scriptures teach that Christ's suffering for the unjust was an atonement for the world. Peter says that Jesus was the sin offering that was needed to restore man to relationship with the Father. Thus, he died for our sin. It was unlike the Old Testament sacrifice that had to be done repeatedly. In contrast, Jesus was the heavenly sacrifice, done once for all, to give us access to God. We all are now to be priests in the very presence of the Holy God (see Exod 29:4). How miraculous it is for a holy God, without sin, to be able to dwell with us and not consume us! The sacrifice of Jesus made us priests in the kingdom.

When we suffer, Peter says that we have the privilege of acting out Christ's role in the drama of redemption. Although we do not add anything to Jesus' work, by following his example we are able to enter into God's plan. The world then can choose to appropriate his life that we have released into the community. We do not add anything to what Christ has already done, but we reenact it.

To conclude, we must remember that the stage we have been looking at is the world, not the church. This world is dangerous, and is filled with mine-fields. To reenact this drama of the passion play, God wants the Christian on stage to disarm the mine-fields. In Act 1, our role is all action, *no speech*. The world speaks and is filled with slander, enmity and hatred. The spotlight is on the world, not on the Christian.

Then the curtain drops, and the world feels the weight of its sin. It is left alone to see its sin in contrast to the righteousness on stage. When the curtain opens to Act 2, the spotlight is now on us as Christians. We are invited to speak, and the world has nothing to say in reply. Then the curtain drops, and conversion can take place.

Unfortunately, there are three tragedies that can replace the passion play if we are not obedient to God's calling. The first one occurs when the world is on stage alone, but the Christian refuses to participate. Thus, there is no drama. The church tries to impress the world that it has its own stage, and says, "Come watch us." But the world is not impressed because the spotlight is not on the church and its world; the spotlight is on the world's stage. The drama was meant to be played out of the passion on stage. For us to play our privileged role, we must get on the world's stage.

Secondly, it is tragic when the spotlight is supposed to be on the world during Act 1, but is instead on the Christian who is speaking slander and enmity. He is supposed to be silent, but instead is causing more explosions. So the whole scene is confused, and there is so much dust in the air that the world cannot see the difference between the world's sin and the Christian's sin. So righteousness is not evident to the world.

A third tragedy can occur in Act 2 if the Christian is asked to speak at his turn, and yet does not say anything in his defense of the gospel. Thus, all the unbeliever knows is his own depravity, without anyone telling him about the glory of Christ.

So Christians, the good news is that you do not have to go to Oberammergau every 10 years to see the the Passion Play reenacted. God has set the drama in our own community. Instead of watching from the balcony, we are allowed to play the lead role of Jesus Christ. This was the very truth I learned 20 years ago in Oberammergau.

My wife wrote in her diary,

Saturday, July 18, 1970 – The sun finally came out after a fashion and shone its glory down on us. We headed back across the border into Northern Bavaria from Austria to the the town of Oberammergau. The Passion Play was being presented but we didn't get a chance to see it...but we did get a chance to share with our friend John about Jesus.

RE-ENACTMENT OF THE PASSION PLAY

The stage: The world (not the church)

Actors:

1. The world, playing itself
2. You, playing the role of Christ

Act 1: Spotlight on the world:

1. World speaks—slander, enmity
2. You—silent

Intermission

Act 2: Spotlight on you:

1. You speak—testimony to Christ
2. World—silent

Curtain drops

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